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Theme Park Experiences and Customer Emotions

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Rosen Research Focus | Dr. Torres, Dr. Wei & Dr. Hua

THEME PARK EXPERIENCES AND CUSTOMER EMOTIONS

Theme parks are places of great excitement, anticipated joy, intense emotions and lasting memories. UCF Rosen College of Hospitality Management researchers Dr. Edwin N. Torres, Dr. Wei Wei, Dr. Nan Hua and a collaborator report on the service aspects of theme parks that impact positively or negatively on customers' emotions. Customers' first impressions of the theme park, their experiences of the rides, and dining and retail offerings were all found to impact on the positive and negative emotions and memories that customers formed of their theme park experience.

Customer emotions have received a great deal of research attention in recent years, as these emotions – positive and negative – vary in response to services received. Much of this attention has focused on the events that precede a specific emotion and then also the consequences of different customer emotions. Having a positive or negative service encounter can impact customer satisfaction and loyalty, and even go so far as to contaminate other customers' experiences of a service, when customers exchange emotions. It is thus critical to understand customer emotions at an intricate level in order to be able to manage these and achieve high levels of customer satisfaction.

WHAT ARE CUSTOMER EMOTIONS?

Emotions are universal to human beings and have different facets and dimensions, ranging from positive emotions, such as joy, happiness

and excitement to more negative emotions such as frustration and disappointment. Emotions while primarily mental or psychological states of feeling, can also induce strong physiological responses for people. Emotions may thus be expressed verbally and non-verbally through body language. Emotions can vary over time especially within settings where customers spend an extended amount of time, such as on vacation or within theme parks.

Theme parks by their very nature elicit a mix of emotions, some intense, some less so, ranging from excitement and delight, to the thrill of fear. For this reason, theme parks offer an important setting for studying emotions which occur in service settings over several hours. While there has been a great deal of scientific research focused on analyzing customer emotions, gaps are still evident in understanding customer emotions in hedonic service settings – those intended to inspire

pleasure. In addition, empirical scientific research is still needed to understand the intricacies that elicit a customer's emotions and the role which each customer service encounter plays in emotional appraisals and memories. For this reason, Rosen College researchers Dr. Edwin N. Torres, Dr. Wei Wei and Dr. Nan Hua, along with a collaborator, conducted an empirical study of customers' emotional experiences of theme parks; the service setting and the impact of the service setting on customer emotions; the impact of interactions with service providers and other customers on emotional experiences; and the impact of customer emotions on their experiences. Specific hypotheses linked to the objectives of the research were set out for testing.

MEASURING CUSTOMER EMOTIONS: PANAS SCALE

To assess emotions within this study, the researchers selected the PANAS scale of



Positive dining experiences are likely to improve satisfaction.

positive and negative affect. The PANAS is a robust scientific assessment tool with good validity and reliability for assessing emotions. The PANAS lists 10 positive and 10 negative descriptors of emotions. The positive list includes being attentive, active, alert, excited, enthusiastic, determined, inspired, proud, interested, and strong. On the negative emotional spectrum, items assess feeling hostile, irritable, ashamed, guilty, distressed, upset, scared, afraid, jittery, and nervous. The PANAS has been used to study emotions across a variety of different service settings.

The PANAS was administered via Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), an online crowdsourcing web service which researchers pay Amazon to use. Amazon then compensates research participants for their participation in the surveys. A total of 252

surveys were completed for this study and out of these 194 met the criteria for usable data analysis. To reduce potential response biases that could potentially impact the results, various controls including rigorous sampling methods were built into the survey design. The final data sample comprised slightly more men (54.64%) than women (45.36%), with the largest age group of respondents between 30 and 39 years old (43.08%); the second largest group was 18 to 29 years old (34.87%). Nearly two thirds (63.21%) of respondents were parents, 54.64% of the sample were single and 39.69% married. Most of the sample had stayed at the theme park between one and three days.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS, THEME PARK RIDES, AND SHOWS

The researchers hypothesized that the first impressions of the theme park upon arrival

for visitors would impact positively on their emotions. Along with this, it was hypothesized that the enjoyment of rides and watching shows in the theme park would also impact positively on emotions. The data confirmed that first impressions on arrival are of great importance in a customer's theme park experience. Rides were found to be the most important factor contributing to the increased probability of having a satisfying overall experience. Interestingly, shows were not found to be a key determinant of positive customer experience.

CUSTOMER SERVICE AND PRICING

Waiting in line for access to a service can have a significant impact on people's emotions, as can the price of a service. The researchers hypothesized that shorter waiting times



Exhilarating rides might boost emotional outlook.

would have a positive impact on customers' emotions. The results of the study indicated that the factor which was most critical to a positive experience while waiting in line was the experience of positive emotions during this time. Effective queue design, with diversions that are entertaining and interactive, can create a sense of movement within the queue and enhance positive emotions of anticipation and fun during the queuing process. From a pricing perspective, the researchers had hypothesized that purchasing tickets would have a negative impact on customer emotions, but the data did not support this.

CUSTOMER INTERACTIONS

Theme parks provide opportunities to interact with other customers while using the theme park attractions and people may influence others through their displays of positive

IN A THEME PARK SETTING, POSITIVE EMOTIONS ARE MORE EASILY STIMULATED THAN NEGATIVE EMOTIONS GIVEN THAT EXPERIENCES AT THEME PARKS ARE HIGHLY HEDONIC DRIVEN.



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Waiting in line for access to a service can have a significant impact on people's emotions.

emotions. This was assessed in the study and the results indicated that when interactions with other customers were emotionally intense, there was a heightened probability of a more positive theme park experience. Dr. Torres adds that the research findings clearly indicated that, "interactions with other guests and family members can impact a guest's emotional state at the theme park."

DINING AND RETAIL

The dining experience was also found to impact significantly and positively on

DESIGNING POSITIVE CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

There are clearly specific design and management practices which produce positive emotional experiences. Effective queue design and management, which evoke a sense of fun and anticipation, can result in very intense positive emotions as was evident in this study. Ensuring a positive arrival experience in relation to ticketing, information, checkpoints and sufficient employees is likely to enable customer satisfaction at these points of interaction.

THE RIDES AND SHOWS ARE THE CORE PRODUCTS AND SERVICES OF A THEME PARK AND REASONS WHY PEOPLE VISIT. NOVELTY AND CREATIVITY PLAY A LARGE ROLE IN CUSTOMER EXPECTATIONS AND SATISFACTION.

customers' emotional experiences. The retail experience (buying souvenirs and necessities such as hats, ponchos and drinks) was, however, a source of some guest dissatisfaction; this research thus supports prior literature indicating that experiential purchases surpass material purchases in enhancing positive customer emotions.

From a retail experience perspective, creating a more experiential interaction through audio-visual design elements such as interactive displays and music, could enhance the customer retail experience by focusing less on the material purchase which can be a source of dissatisfaction. Positive dining experiences with enhanced food



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Positive interactions with other visitors can enhance a person's experience.

offerings, exceptional service and innovative restaurant themes are also likely to enhance customer satisfaction.

Dr. Torres says that another important finding was that emotions evoked at a specific touchpoint of service or "moment of truth" can permeate through to other experiences and continue as the guest moves through the theme park. So a positive experience while waiting in a queue might impact the emotional mood of a guest waiting for a ride. Similarly, an exhilarating ride could result in a guest entering a dining or retail venue with a more positive emotional outlook. Recognizing the impact of one experience on another means that each of the unique service touchpoints within a theme park needs focus to ensure an overall positive guest experience.

Interestingly, most of the theme park visitors in this study reported very positive overall emotional experiences of the theme park, with the data indicating notably high levels of satisfaction with the theme park visit. Dr. Torres says that this is in itself an important finding given that, "anecdotally we know theme park operators (and other service industries managers) get complaints and face upset or outraged customers." Perceptual bias may explain the recall of positive experiences by guests, as these impressions may have been more vividly stored in people's memories and thus more clearly recalled upon reflection of the experience. It may also be though that people are more inclined to recall positive memories rather than negative memories within hedonic environments, such as a theme park.

RESEARCHERS IN FOCUS

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

This study examines the impact of theme park experiences on customer emotions.

REFERENCES

Key Paper

Torres, E. N., Wei, W., Hua, N. & Chen, P. (2019). Customer emotions minute by minute: How guests experience different emotions within the same service environment. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 77, pp 128–138.

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PERSONAL RESPONSE

What advice would you give Theme Park Managers to minimize any potential negative emotions evoked by additional retail purchases customers feel obliged to make, once they have entered the theme park?

Theme park managers have a great opportunity to make the retail experience more experiential. While some of the newer stores at popular attractions have made purchases more interactive and customized, many retail stores at theme parks still embrace a more traditional model. Specialty and seasonal merchandise can also help attract enthusiasm among theme park visitors. In some of my studies, I've found that ticket pricing at theme parks is a major source of customer outrage. Nevertheless, theme parks have sustained attendance at the higher price points and retail purchases are an important source of profits for operators. Therefore, it is important to change value perceptions in a positive direction by improving the quality of merchandise, offering packages or bundles of items, providing more options for customization, and making the retail experience more interactive and experiential.

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